K. Danner Clouser is a witty man and, in my opinion, the wittiest ethicist. Let no one say that this is a cheap accolade because ethicists are generally a pretty dour breed. On the contrary, ethicists can be intentionally amusing. Ethicists delve into somber subjects: death and dying, abortion and genetics, experimenting with humans and rationing medical care, yet as lecturers and teachers, many of them are droll, whimsical, and comical. An annual meeting of bioethicists features Bioethics Follies. Several years ago, a conference brought some fifty of the pioneers of bioethics together to explore the origins of their field. In my closing remarks, I was moved to say that the three days had been as much about biocomedy as about bioethics. The topic of the conference was serious; the tone genial. Among the speakers, Dan Clouser was, as he always is, the most entertaining. He began his remarks by extolling the early days of bioethics, “when it was possible to catch up on all the literature on one weekend and contribute to it on the next.” Whenever Dan Clouser speaks, his audience is ready to laugh.

Humorous as some ethicists may be, humor has little place in ethics. Many an ethicist opens a lecture not only with humorous remarks but also with a barrage of slides made from cartoons and comic strips. Then the humor stops and serious philosophical analysis begins. Few persons of wit and humor dwelt among the classical predecessors of modern ethicists, the great moral philosophers, if we can judge by occasional testimony rather than writing. Socrates was described as always serene and smiling, though his jokes are dissipated in ponderous translations. Hume, it is said, was an affable man, and I have caught the fleeting glimpse of a joke even in the Prussian punctiliousness of Immanuel Kant. Michele de Montaigne, not a moral philosopher but a most perceptive observer of the moral life, wrote, “the blaze of gaiety kindles in the mind vivid, bright flashes beyond our natural capacity ... I love a gay and sociable wisdom (and) agree with Plato when he says an easy or difficult humor is of great importance to the goodness and badness of the soul” (The Essays III 5, 641).

Even if the moral philosophers are humorless in their philosophizing, the great writers of comedy have reveled in morality which provides so
many opportunities to unmask hypocrisy, puncture pomposity, ridicule solemnity, expose folly, and castigate greed. Aristophenes made the sophists and their morality (with which he, quite unfairly, linked Socrates) the laughing stock of Athens. Molière, who made almost everyone the laughing stock for everyone else, was particularly fond of satirizing the posturing physicians of Paris. Indeed, his plays preview, in fanciful fashion, modern bioethics. In his *Malade Imaginaire*, Argan the hypochondriac is induced into the profession, *in nostro docto corpore*, by passing a ridiculous examination administered by pompous doctors (Molière, III iii). In his lesser known *L’Amour médecin*, four doctors argue over the best remedy for the patient, who eventually recovers without their help, much to their anger: “it is better to die according to the rules,” says Dr. Bahys, “than to recover contrary to them” (Molière, *L’Amour médecin*, II v). In a hardly known play, *Monsieur De Pourceaugnac*, Molière has a physician who is seeking a patient that has escaped his care proclaim, “his disease, which I have been told to cure, is my property ... he has been placed under my care and he is obliged to be my patient ... I shall have him condemned by decree to be cured by me” (Molière, *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, I ii). We could use these scenes as texts for treatises on paternalism and autonomy, or care of the dying.

Humor, then, can comment perceptively on morality, yet ethics, the study of morality, seems so humorless. Is it frivolous to wonder what place wit might have in ethics? Is it ridiculous to ask whether humor might be a necessary, if not sufficient, talent for an ethicist? If Montaigne and Plato esteem humor’s contribution to moral wisdom and to virtue, should we modern ethicists not also? The answers to such questions depend, of course, on knowing what humor is. So familiar an aspect of human life remains almost indefinable. Few philosophers have even attempted to place humor within their metaphysics or epistemology, and it does not appear in the catalogue of virtues produced by the classical moral philosophers and theologians. Strange, is it not, that the philosophers have ignored humor, since it seems to be one of the few characteristics that distinguishes our species from all others. *Homo ridens et homo risibilis*: we laugh and we laugh at each other. Aristotle did note that (in his book *On the Soul*, I think) but made little of it, at least in the writings we know. Henri Bergson penned a quite unfunny philosophical essay on *Laughter*. He opens by saying what a difficult subject he is about to undertake, “baffling every effort, slipping away only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophical speculation.” He concludes